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Natural Beauties

Ann Wilson Lloyd

Paradox ripples through Bill Thompson's luscious objects much like their brilliant, seductive surfaces shift and distort reflected images. They are mysterious and beautiful. There is something alien, yet entirely familiar about them. They are laboriously handcrafted but retain no trace of the hand. These glossy, monochrome, minimalist and hermetic shapes embody the antithesis of the chaotic surface of the natural world, yet it's clear that nature must play a subliminal role.

Like Jean Arp and Ellsworth Kelly, Bill Thompson cultivates the ever-fertile, contradictory edge between the randomness of the physical and the rationality of the intellect. One could argue, though, that Thompson goes far deeper into each opposition, invests far more in his process of merging and counter-posing, and has submerged in his practice a private language akin to genetic codes. Thompson's objects are made entirely by the artist in an intensive, multi-step process that starts with that most un-organic of materials, dense polyurethane foam. The modestly scaled square or rectangular foam block is an unlikely seed-bed for such exotic specimens. There is nothing about this material that initially speaks to him, as, say, the innate qualities of marble or wood that might inform the more traditional reductive sculptor. It is "a substrate," Thompson says, with "no suggestion of life or possibility." Its proportions quite literally provide for him "a box from which I must attempt to escape."

He does so by drawing, cutting, and grinding the shapes into being. By taking on the role of the machine, he further infuses nature, i.e., himself, into the process, and allows design to evolve intuitively, between head and hand. Thompson's sculptural forms are guided by his own intuition ordered through a taxonomic system he has devised, in which a series of specific shapes, or Species, as he calls them, are vaguely suggestive of abstractions of nature, from the micro to macrocosmic. Fractal physics have inspired him, as have the earth's tectonic plates and the glacially scarred landscape of his native New England.

His *Altered Flats*, for instance, have a topographical feel, one he himself has likened to the undulating surface of a lake. The *Round*, *Dish* and *Cut-Thru* series resemble positive and negative versions of tumbled boulders or river stones. The lily-pad-shaped *Shells* are a newer Species. Their bowl-like edges seem to control their fluid, painted surfaces as if the phenomenon of meniscus were at play. Nearly all the Species, (but espe-



cially the conveyor belt-like *Loops*, which are painted both front and hidden back) range tantalizingly between sculpture and painting, their forms never fully committing to either.

Despite the work's flowing look of digitized seamlessness, no computer modeling or molding process is ever used. "Drawing determines the shapes, the rest is response", Thompson says. It is a physically exhausting, time consuming process, but his grail is the "the thrill of uncertainty in discovering new forms and fresh concepts". Through controlled limitation of his classification system, he finds, as did Darwin, infinite variation of detail. The geometry of each piece varies with the planar perspective. Edges and sides can be sharp, rounded, angled, faceted, contrasting with the surface color, outline and/or contours to create sustained tension all round. Those precise edges of the *Shells* play formally against their scalloped, jewel-like, undulating surfaces; the abrupt meeting of the matte white, undercut sides disrupts the visual trance. "The collision of opposites is where beauty happens", Thompson says, and adds: "I am unapologetically a champion of beauty, not prettiness, but a beauty that's compelling and enigmatic".

Seductive form leads to seductive color. Once born, the shape does find a voice, even "asking" for a specific hue. Thompson never repeats a color; each finished object is unique both in form and in hue. One studio wall is covered with a grid of color chips, each one hand-mixed from automotive base paints. His

deep, lustrous finishes are, again, the result of a long, arduous and tedious process. With a spray gun, he applies fifteen to twenty coats to each piece, primer, color, clear coat. These are interspersed with sanding, polishing and buffing, until not the slightest blemish remains.

The colors shimmer and shapes shift as light plays woozily on mobile-seeming surfaces. A piece may appear wine red, dark purple, or metallic violet depending on one's vantage point. The associative qualities of color as well as its intrinsic powers are intriguing to him. Often Thompson produces related groupings of five or so, with individual pieces of similar scale perceived as a constellation of colors. These groupings represent his version of a "big painting".

In all of Thompson's works, references abound: reflections in the curves of a luxury car, precious sparkling gems, puddles of colored quicksilver, priceless, decadent, even toxic, but impossible to resist; they might almost be edible. The frisson between seduction and oddity, between their guise as a vaguely natural shape, but one dressed in flaunted artificiality, hits the viewer like luxe versions of the surreal object, dazzled by the eye, intrigued by the mind, and always felt in the gut.

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Bill Thompson, *Redondos y dibujos / Rounds, drawings* (2009). Estudio del artista / artist's studio (Boston, USA).



Bill Thompson, *Tres Redondos esculpidos / three carved Rounds* (2009). Estudio del artista / artist's studio (Boston, USA).



Bill Thompson, *Pop* (2008). Uretano sobre bloque de poliuretano / urethane on polyurethane block, 73x56x13cm.



Bill Thompson, *After Midnight* (2008). Uretano sobre bloque de poliuretano / urethane on polyurethane block, 54x48x15cm.